U.S. TRAVEL ASSOCIATION

Visa Waiver Program Myths and Realities

Myth: The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) lacks security protocols necessary to identify potential terrorist threats.

Reality: The VWP *strengthens* security standards, improves information-sharing with participating countries and enhances our ability to identify potential threats.

- VWP travelers present less risk than travelers from non-VWP countries.
  The U.S.:
  - Screens VWP travelers more frequently;
  - Benefits from enhanced law enforcement and security-related data sharing on each traveler ;
  - Has greater assurance of the integrity of their travel documents; and
  - Has far more leverage to ensure high security standards in their home countries.

- Participating VWP countries are required to share information about known or suspected terrorists and criminals, as well as maintain high standards for transportation security, border security and document integrity. VWP is the only program that gives the United States the opportunity to conduct broad inspections of foreign security standards.

- All VWP travelers must use, at a minimum, machine-readable passports that conform to stringent international aviation security standards. The use of e-passports, which are particularly difficult to forge, is mandatory for all VWP travelers from countries admitted to the program in 2008 or thereafter.

- VWP countries are required to promptly enter data on all lost and stolen passports into INTERPOL's Stolen and Lost Travel Document (SLTD) database. No such requirements exist for countries that do not participate in the VWP.

Myth: Unlike visa travelers, the government does not screen VWP travelers before they arrive in the United States.

Reality: Every VWP traveler is screened against multiple law enforcement and security databases before arriving in the United States.

- Through the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), DHS can determine whether an individual traveler represents any law enforcement or security risk before travelling to the United States.

- ESTA gives DHS the capability to conduct both advance and ongoing vetting of VWP travelers through appropriate law enforcement databases, including:
  - Terrorist Screening Database (TSDB)
  - Lost and stolen passports data (including INTERPOL's SLTD database); and
  - Visa revocations; previous visa refusals; and other immigration violations.

- Such individualized screening is enhanced by the information sharing agreements that are required for VWP membership.

Myth: VWP travelers frequently overstay their authorized periods of admission.

Reality: The VWP is not a significant source of overstays.

- Under the VWP, individuals must register online for permission to travel to the United States through ESTA. If the U.S. is concerned about an individual he or she can be denied authorization to travel to the U.S.. Additionally, Customs and Border Protection officers may deny entry to anyone who is considered at risk of overstaying.

- The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has indicated that the cumulative VWP overstay rate is less than 1 percent. This number is likely artificially inflated as it includes travelers for whom DHS has no record of departure or who have used documents that cannot be easily matched to incoming records. Because all matching errors are treated as overstays, the actual overstay rate is lower.

Myth: Travel to the United States is less secure from VWP countries.

Reality: DHS receives better information about inbound travelers from VWP countries than from non-VWP countries.

		VWP Countries	Non-VWP Countries
Who is coming here?		ESTA	VISA
Who poses a risk?	Required to share terrorist lists?	√	
	Required to share criminal data?	√	
	Required to share lost and stolen passport information?	√	
Who is this person?	Required to have secure electronic passport?	√	
	Fingerprints obtained?	√	√

- The U.S. conducts intense reviews of VWP countries, at least every other year to ensure compliance. These VWP reviews can result (and have resulted) in membership revocation or other sanctions.